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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HILLAH 000378

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: MOOD SERENE, SECURITY EXTENSIVE AT DOWNTOWN AL-HILLAH
POLLING CENTER

REF: HILLAH 0377, HILLAH 0376

[1](#)1. Summary: Family trips to polling places, patriotic music and mosque exhortations characterized the activity around one downtown Al-Hillah, Babil Province polling station on December

[1](#)15. Male and female screeners courteously searched voters as they moved smoothly through the entrance. Policemen deployed around the station in groups of two and three took charge of their colleagues' weapons as one by one they entered, unarmed, to vote. The quiet activity and calm mood suggested that in at least one neighborhood, Iraqis increasingly familiar with the democratic process are determined to cast their votes and move their country forward. End summary.

[1](#)2. The bustle and blaring patriotic music inside the Babil Police General Headquarters in downtown Al-Hillah shortly after the polls opened at 7 a.m. belied the quiet outside the walls. While no more than a handful of single men had taken to the streets to walk to their polling stations in the surrounding neighborhood, inside the police compound SWAT team members in tan jumpsuits, many of them wearing ski masks, piled into pick-up trucks with mounted machine guns and sped away on patrols.

[1](#)3. Pedestrian traffic remained slow through the second hour of voting, with small groups of Iraqis -- husbands and wives and single men -- moving past the police station towards the Al-Waili School, a high school temporarily converted into a polling center. Iraqi Police deployed regularly along the streets outnumbered voters. A group of about twenty youths, only a few appearing to have reached the voting age, marched in a disorderly knot past the police station towards the school banging bass drums, waving giant red and green flags, symbols of Shi'a Islam, and chanting the name of Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani in time with the drumbeat.

[1](#)4. At the station itself, the traffic steadily trickled in, increasing marginally through mid-morning. A mosque loudly blared a tinny call reminding voters to remember Imam Hussein and declaring, "this is a day of victory for the Marja'ia" again and again. Almost all of those voting arrived as families, women in abayas escorted by husbands and fathers, accompanied by children, the girls often dressed in brightly colored red and pink dresses. Screeners at the gate to the school's courtyard, men standing to the left and women to the right inside a booth made of cloth curtains, quickly patted down voters and let them through.

[1](#)5. Qais Al-Hasnawi, a spokesman for the Babil Province Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq (IECI), walking out of the school, his finger purple with the ink used to show that he had voted, said, "the Iraqis are now familiar with elections. Electoral education is widespread." He related that by this time, about 10:45 a.m., in the January vote and October referendum, lines stretched outside the school's courtyard and into the street. Al-Hasnawi suggested that in January and October voters rushed to the polls as early as they could, hoping to be finished and home before a terrorist attack. This time, he said, there was no such urgency. Police deployed at the site seemed relaxed. They smoked, called greetings to voters they recognized, and chatted with friends and IECI staff. Periodically, one would hand his AK-47 rifle to a colleague, enter the school, and emerge 10 or 15 minutes later, his finger purple from voting.

[1](#)6. Voters leaving the school building seemed eager to talk about their choices with Western reporters and REO Hillah staff, and displayed no unease as other voters and police huddled around to listen. About 80 percent of the voters leaving Al-Waili High School disclosed that they voted for the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA, ballot number 555), but others weren't shy about sharing different choices. A 26-year-old policeman named Amir Mehdi explained that his vote for Iyad Allawi's National Iraqi List (ballot number 731) was a vote against religious interference in the government. "It reminds me of the Middle Ages in Europe, when the Church dominated the governments," he said. He described Allawi as "a strong man," praised the former Prime Minister for overseeing the destruction of terrorist camps in Fallujah, and said that Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari had done nothing to solve Iraq's problems.

[1](#)7. A family of 14, five men, five abaya-clad women, and four children, walked together into the polling station at about 11 a.m. They quickly entered the school, voted, and after about 20 minutes emerged to tell a group of reporters and REO staff that

all 10 of the adults had cast their votes for Mithal Al-Alousi's List for the Iraqi Nation (ballot number 620). The children, like their parents, had dipped their fingers into the purple voting ink. One of the women, a 28-year-old named Asmaa Abdul Hussein, said that Al-Alousi "represents the people, and feels the pain of the people." She said that they had voted for Allawi in January, but maintained that "we were not convinced by his performance," and that he was now trying too hard to befriend the Baathists. The family patriarch, a retired contractor named Hamza Abdul Hussein, said that Al-Alousi was an enemy of the Baathists.

18. Al-Hasnawi, the IECI spokesman, reported that by late morning, about 50 percent of those registered had voted at the handful of polling centers he had visited. Traffic remained at a steady flow of small families and single men, slightly decreasing as noon and midday prayers approached. He expressed his satisfaction with the conduct of the election monitors, which at Al-Waili included representatives of the Badr Organization, the Allawi slate (ballot number 731), and two Iraqi non-governmental organizations, including the Iraqi Election Information Network (EIN). He seemed almost surprised as he surveyed the scene. "It's so smooth," he said.

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